

Rules of the Game

All About Psionics (Part One)

By Skip Williams



The **D&D** game is all about exotic and astonishing things. The thrill of confronting and vanquishing the unknown remains one of the game's chief attractions to many people. Still, one prefers to understand one's own characters, and DMs -- who must orchestrate all the game's action -- wisely shy away from game elements they don't understand. A leading source of mystery (and confusion) in the game is the growing body of materials that deal with psionic powers. It's easy to appreciate psionics' capability, especially after a mind flayer eats your favorite character's brain. Adopting psionics for wider use in a campaign, however, presents a bigger problem.

This series looks into psionic powers and how they work in the game. As we shall see, psionic powers need not induce bewilderment.

What are Psionics?

Most DMs and players understand that psionics are powers derived from the mind, and that's correct. A psionic practitioner relies on a trained mind to create effects as marvelous and inexplicable as any spell. Does that mean psionics are some form of magic? Not really, though an untrained observer would have a hard time distinguishing psionic effects from magical effects.



So, how are psionics different from magic? They are not much different at all -- especially if you use the rule for psionics-magic transparency (see page 55 in the *Expanded Psionics Handbook*), which is the standard rule for incorporating psionics into a campaign. After all, psionic powers spring from the mind, and magic, too, is largely a function of the mind. The major difference between a spellcaster and a psionicist is the character's source of power. **Spells** rely on a universal source of power that exists throughout the universe. The spellcaster's power source is external to the spellcaster.

Psionic training, on the other hand, allows a psionicist to become the source of his own power, rather than channeling external power through himself. The game's rules reflect the subtle differences between psionics and

magic in various ways. Chief among these is a psionist's pool of power points. Other aspects of psionics are less obvious; for example, psionic powers don't employ verbal, somatic, or material components, and a psionic effect cannot be recorded on a scroll.

Some Key Terms

Here are a few terms used in both the game and this article to describe psionics and their effects.

Manifesting: The psionic equivalent of casting a spell. You manifest a power; you cast a spell. You manifest a power by spending psionic power points. The exact number of points you must spend to manifest a power is noted in the power's description, though some powers allow you to choose to spend extra power points to augment the power's effects.

Manifester Level: The psionic equivalent of **caster level**. Your level in the **class** that gives you access to the particular psionic power you're manifesting. Most powers have variables, such as range or damage dealt, that depend on your manifester level. Your manifester level also affects the power in a few other ways (for example, the maximum number of power points you can spend on the power [see Power Points, below]).

You can choose to manifest a power at a lower manifester level than normal (but never less than the minimum manifester level for the power you're using). If you do, all of the power's variables that depend on your manifester level function at the lower level. Any manifester level check (see the next entry) you make to overcome power resistance with that particular manifestation of the power uses the lower level. Likewise, any attempt to dispel the power's effects need only overcome the decreased manifester level.

If you're multiclassed, you could have different manifester levels for the powers you have by virtue of your various classes. For example, a 4th-level psychic warrior/5th-level psion has a manifester level of 4 for psychic warrior powers and a manifester level of 5 for psion powers. If you've taken a prestige class, your levels in that class may stack with levels in another class to determine your manifester level. Otherwise, your levels in your various psionic classes usually don't stack for purposes of determining your manifester level.

Manifester Level Check: A test of your power as a psionic manifester. To make a manifester level check, roll 1d20 plus your manifester level for the power you are manifesting.

Power or Psionic Power: The psionic equivalent of a spell. A power is a mental trick that produces a specific effect. To produce its effects one time, a power must be manifested by spending power points. To manifest the power again, you must spend more power points.

As a psionist you learn a personal repertoire of powers as you gain levels in a psionic class (or classes). You cannot manifest a power you do not know (though you might be able to use a power stored in an item).

Power Points: The personal reserve of mental energy you have available each day. Manifesting a power you know requires you to expend one or more of your power points, as noted in power description. You can manifest a particular power as many times each day as you want, but each manifestation uses up part of your daily allotment of power points.

If you have fewer power points available than the power requires, you cannot manifest the power. If you have more power points available than the power requires, you may be able to spend additional power points to augment the power (if the power allows this option). The cost and effects of augmentation are noted in the power's description. You cannot, however, spend more power points on a power than your manifester level for that power.

Your class and **level** determines your basic allotment of power points each day. Your **ability scores** may give you additional power points each day.

If you're multiclassed, you may receive power points from more than one class. If you do, you combine your power points into a single pool that you can use to manifest any power you know.

Some creatures have psionic powers they can manifest without expending power points. These powers are called psi-like abilities. See Part Three for details.

Psionicist: Not a game term. I use it in this series as a general term for a **creature** or **character** who can wield psionic powers.

What's Next?

That's all the time we have this week. Next week we'll explore psionics further by examining the ways in which psionic powers are similar to spells and the ways in which they differ.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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